Introducing Victorian poetry

Of the difficulties that waylay a Victorian anthologist two are obvious. Where is he to begin? – Where to end? … Wordsworth happened to be the first Laureate of Queen Victoria’s reign … [A]fter many months spent in close study of Victorian verse … I rise from the task in reverence and wonder not only at the mass (not easily sized) of poetry written with ardour in these less-than-a-hundred years, but at the amount of it which is excellent. Arthur Quiller-Couch, The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse

One distinction of Victorian poetry is the degree to which serious work and popular culture converged, as evidenced by snippets of poems now proverbial: “Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all”; “God’s in his heaven – / All’s right with the world!”; “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” These lines, from Alfred Tennyson’s In Memoriam (1850), Robert Browning’s Pippa Passes (1841), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese (1850) become reassuring clichés when shorn of their contexts. The poems themselves offer less conventional assurance: In Memoriam involves a male poet’s impassioned grief for another man; Pippa’s hope is sung against the backdrop of adultery and murder; and Barrett Browning’s larger sequence opens by alluding to Theocritus and fleeing from love.

The best Victorian poetry is complex, challenging, and experimental, and it was read widely, thanks to its circulation during the first era of mass media. For Victorians, that mass medium was print. If Sir Walter Scott’s Marmion (1808) and The Lady of the Lake (1810) sold 50,000 copies by 1836, Tennyson’s In Memoriam sold 60,000 copies in three to four years and Enoch Arden 40,000 copies in mere weeks. Nearly 400,000 copies of John Keble’s The Christian Year (1827) had been purchased when its copyright expired in 1873. To instance another print form, the Edinburgh Review and Quarterly Review, founded early in the century, peaked at circulations of 13,000 in 1813–14. Cornhill Magazine, in which poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold, and the Brontës appeared, attained a circulation approaching 100,000 with its first issue. And cheap papers aimed at working and lower middle classes, like the Family Herald or London Journal, also published original poetry and sold
between 300,000 and 450,000 copies per issue in the 1850s. Wilkie Collins estimated the audience for serial stories in these papers in the millions. As Quiller-Couch observes, William Wordsworth was the first Poet Laureate appointed by Queen Victoria. Indeed, Wordsworth’s greatest poem, *The Prelude*, appeared in the same year as *In Memoriam*, in 1850. If Wordsworth became a Victorian poet by virtue of longevity, neither did Romanticism end with the deaths of Byron and Shelley. The early Tennyson cannot be understood apart from John Keats, Robert Browning from Percy Bysshe Shelley, Barrett Browning from Lord Byron, or the Rossetti family from William Blake. The poems of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon (which also influenced Tennyson and Barrett Browning) are regularly included in anthologies of both Romantic and Victorian poetry.

The question of scope also complicates attempts to identify Victorian poetry. More than 275 poets are represented in the first *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*, including seventeen North American poets (for example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman) as well as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats. Far from deeming themselves Victorian poets, Joyce caricatured “Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet,” in the Proteus section of *Ulysses*; Pound termed the Victorian “a rather blurry, messy sort of a period” in 1913; and Yeats announced in a BBC radio broadcast of 1936, “My generation, because it disliked Victorian rhetorical moral fervour, came to dislike all rhetoric. In France, where there was a similar movement, a poet had written, ‘Take rhetoric and wring its neck.’”

In contrast to Quiller-Couch’s inclusive sweep, Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange included only sixteen poets (and no women) in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1959), an anthology deeply influenced by modernism. Should Victorian poetry be conceived in terms of its historical diversity and amplitude, as Quiller-Couch would argue, or by the portion most relevant to a given decade’s tastes, as the example of Houghton and Stange implies? A forced choice between these alternatives is spurious. This study examines the diversity of Victorian poetry as well as canonical texts, and insists upon specific historical conditions as well as the interests of twenty-first-century readers. Approaching Victorian poetry in the context of print culture furthers these aims and, without effacing its links to larger poetic tradition (including Romanticism and modernism), helps pinpoint what is specific to Victorian poetry.

Poetic forms and themes did not definitively change in 1832, when Great Britain first extended the franchise and embarked on a course of (uneven) reform, or in 1837, when Victoria ascended the throne. The Romantic...
refashioning of blank verse, ballads, sonnets, narratives, and more into vehicles for probing human psychology, political injustice, ontology, the built world, and nature was itself a form of modernity and led directly to Victorian innovations. Romantic poetry was also diverse and experimental, embracing the “Miltonic sublime” of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the deflating irony of Byron’s Don Juan, and the mundane particularity of Mary Robinson’s “Winkfield Plain.” As Stuart Curran notes, the very title of Lyrical Ballads is an oxymoron and points to an experimental generic hybrid, a mix of narrative and lyric, of communitarian impulse with the expression of an isolated individual.5

Yet fundamental changes in the material, socio-political, and intellectual conditions of British life after 1830 affected the content, form, and function of poetry in the reign of Queen Victoria.6 If, as Virginia Woolf alleged of post-impressionist painting early in the twentieth century, “on [sic] or about December, 1910, human character changed,”7 in 1830 nature changed. On September 15 the first intercity railway journey originated in Liverpool, and the death that day of William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool, who miscalculated the speed of the approaching locomotive (the Rocket) and was run over, aptly symbolizes the death of older configurations of nature. Propulsion through space and time on land had hitherto depended on the muscles, feeding, and watering of animals or human pedestrians, who generally followed roads shaped by natural contours. In contrast, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes, the “mechanical motion generated by steam power is characterized by regularity, uniformity, unlimited duration and acceleration.”8

Railway lines, moreover, cut across open land according to abstract engineering principles rather than local custom or the natural paths cut by flowing water. As the protagonist of Aurora Leigh (1856), by Barrett Browning, recounts,

we passed
The liberal open country and the close,
And shot through tunnels, like a lightning-wedge
By great Thor-hammers driven through the rock,
Which, quivering through the intestine blackness, splits,
And lets it in at once. (7:429–34)

Such inventions not only gave Victorians new relations to time, space, and nature but also new sounds and new rhythms. Not coincidentally, the railroad had a profound impact on the circulation of print, radically speeding up distribution and ratcheting up demand, since travelers increasingly turned to reading to pass the time and retain a sense of privacy.9 Fittingly, two of the
passengers on board the *Rocket* on September 15, 1830 were the future Poet Laureate of England, who celebrated this new technology in “Locksley Hall” (1842), and the man whose early death would inspire *In Memoriam*, the poem that won Tennyson the Laureateship: Arthur Henry Hallam.10

Older constructs of nature took another blow in 1830 from geologists’ hammers, when the first volume of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* was published. Though James Hutton had already discovered “deep time” in the rock formations of Siccar Point, Scotland, in the late eighteenth century, Lyell systematized evidence that earth’s timescale vastly exceeded biblical chronology and that earlier species had become extinct. Charles Darwin extended this impetus, remapping nature as the site of impersonal forces and a “struggle for existence” in *On the Origin of Species* (1859).11 Darwin had no sooner published his magnum opus than its principal tenets were circulated to homes throughout England. In addition to widespread reviews, George Henry Lewes discussed Darwin’s new book in successive chapters of *Studies in Animal Life*, serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, while *Punch* ridiculed Darwin and the emergent discipline of social science in “Unnatural Selection and Improvement of Species. (A Paper Intended to be Read at our Social Science Congress by One who has been Spending Half-an-Hour or so with Darwin).”12 Wordsworth’s “impulse from a vernal wood” that might “teach” “more of … moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can” (“The Tables Turned,” 21–4) became increasingly difficult to imagine when compelling new evidence pointed to a nature “red in tooth and claw / With ravine” (*In Memoriam*, 56:13–16).

The impact on traditional Christianity of such work also helps to define the Victorian era. If, predictably, these new paradigms drove some Victorian poets to unbelief or (to use the term coined by scientist Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869) agnosticism, a general sense that traditional religion was being renegotiated brought theology to the fore. Even love poems were likely to touch on religion: was earthly love a scintillation of divine, undying love or an animal instinct as transient as life? Coventry Patmore’s scripting of domesticity in *The Angel in the House* (1854–63) enunciates a firm theology:

> This little germ of nuptial love,  
> Which springs so simply from the sod,  
> The root is, as my song shall prove,  
> Of all our love to man and God.  
> (1:537–40)

George Meredith’s antiphonal lesson in *Modern Love* (1862) that marriages, like love itself, can die is grounded in an opposing cosmology: “‘I play for Seasons; not Eternities!’ / Says Nature, laughing on her way. ‘So must / All
those whose stake is nothing more than dust!” (13:1–3). Philip Davis rightly claims that “the serious relation between belief and unbelief in the period makes unbelief itself a religious phenomenon.”

Another factor that pressured poets to take positions on vital contemporary issues was the explosion of print culture into a mass medium from the 1840s onward. If the philosophical and political ferment of the French Revolution and succeeding Napoleonic wars did so much to define literary production from 1790 to 1825, changes in Victorian publishing were themselves “revolutionary.” Steam-driven technology that made railroads possible began to be widely applied to printing presses in the 1830s and 1840s, and Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, the first of the cheap “respectable” periodicals that combined news; fiction; poetry; and informative articles on science, technology, education, political economy, and more, appeared in 1832.

The possibilities of reaching a mass audience through print were further realized in the 1840s by illustrated papers such as the Family Herald and The Illustrated London News. Books were still expensive and usually purchased only by the few, but the extraordinary success of Charles Dickens’s Pickwick Papers, published in twenty monthly shilling installments in 1836–7, created a new publishing trend; and much of the age’s best literature reached audiences in serial form (whether in individual parts or in magazines and weekly papers). This extended to poetry in some instances, and Robert Browning’s decision to issue his Bells and Pomegranates in eight double-columned, sixteen-page numbers from 1841 to 1846 must be seen in relation to Dickens’s publishing success.

The 1850s marked a further watershed in publishing. In 1855 taxes on newspapers (imposed earlier in the nineteenth century to limit the spread of radical thought among working classes) were abolished, and the drop in price along with technological improvements created a boom in periodicals directed to all sectors of the British reading public. In the 1850s far more Britons could also borrow reading material. Circulating libraries had long been a feature of Great Britain, but the fees charged by most excluded the masses; and even middle-class patrons had access only to limited selections if they lived outside London. In 1850 parliament passed a bill founding free libraries, and artisans in the northern industrial cities of Liverpool and Manchester soon benefited. For middle-class patrons throughout Britain, a key event was the opening in 1852 of Mudie’s Select Library in New Oxford Street, an institution that made borrowing affordable. Fiction was its mainstay, but this and other libraries carried wide arrays of newspapers and magazines in which poetry first appeared or was reprinted, and best-selling poems were also on hand. Charles Mudie purchased 2,500 copies of Tennyson’s Enoch Arden to lend
The same year that Mudie opened his New Oxford Street quarters, W. H. Smith and Son opened railway bookstalls throughout the country, stocking one-volume novels that sold for one or two shillings, and a range of weekly papers selling for a penny or two.

In the 1860s print production became cheaper yet with high-speed rotary presses and paper made from esparto grass or wood pulp. For the rest of the century, according to Richard Altick, “periodical printing became one of the most highly mechanized of all English mass-production industries”; cheap reprints of books produced by the same methods, including volumes of recent or older poetry, put books in the hands of all who were interested.

The effect on poetry of a surrounding mass medium of print is visible in two major poems published six years apart but composed in different eras, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. Both are first-person narratives of the poet’s development. Aurora’s “relations in the Unseen” nourish her poetic gift and enable her to draw “The elemental nutriment and heat / From nature” (1:473–5), a Romantic premise also evident in the poem’s tacit argument that imaginative vision can transform the world. Wordsworth’s alpine vision of “Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity,” and his epiphany upon Mount Snowdon of “a mind / That feeds upon infinity, that broods / Over the dark abyss” (6:638–9, 14:70–2), are answered by Aurora’s culminating, apocalyptic vision of “The first foundations of that new, near Day / Which should be builded out of heaven to God” (9:956–7).

But just as Wordsworth’s world is innocent of the train that Aurora and Marion take from Paris to Marseilles, only Barrett Browning provides a publishing history as part of Aurora’s poetic development, giving due attention to the impact of critical reception and even the poet’s resort to “magazines, / And weekly papers” (3:310–11) for money to support her vocation. The novel is also a palpable presence in Barrett Browning’s poem as it is not in *The Prelude* – a symptom of poetry that still commanded public readerships and prestige but was emerging when the novel flourished. In *Aurora Leigh* Marion Erle’s drugging and rape hark back to Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, while the blinding of Aurora’s cousin Romney is indebted to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Another divergence between *The Prelude* and *Aurora Leigh* is that the former is structured by the poet’s formation, conversion to the cause of revolution, disillusionment, and recovery of poetic vision, whereas *Aurora Leigh* is ultimately structured by a debate – personal, philosophical, political – about how best to reform society.

Debate itself is fundamentally Victorian, revealing an assumption that more than one perspective marks any issue and that truth is subject to contestation.
Victorian poetry is characteristically dialogic, presupposing and even harbor-
ing the existence of multiple voices. Print materialized the many-voicedness of Victorian poetry, since one poem or volume was sure to be challenged by another and all participated in the roiling, unceasing, sometimes chaotic flow of print through millions of hands in the form of books, newspapers, mag-
azines, or paperbound serial parts. Isobel Armstrong demonstrates that the multivocality of Victorian poetry was not just an effect of material culture, however. She terms the defining form of Victorian poetry the “double poem”: one that expresses an emotion or point of view yet, through formal means, simultaneously calls into question the poem’s grounds for representing its subject and who or what should figure in poetry. This philosophical skepticism is manifested as poetic technique, so that the double poem is intrinsically aesthetic yet opens a space for cultural politics. In so doing the double poem challenges Immanuel Kant’s assertion that art exists unto itself, apart from politics. Rather, the debate that surrounds poetry in print culture (and informs its content) inhabits its aesthetic foundations.19

The dramatic monologue illuminates the point. A key Victorian contri-
bution to modern poetic tradition, and most typically a “double poem” in Armstrong’s sense, the dramatic monologue subjects the lyric utterance of an individual to a social context, positioning that speaker in relation to a specific time, place, situation, and tacit or explicit auditor. By doing so, the dramatic monologue calls attention to the artifice of lyric utterance, which can appear to be direct and unmediated yet emerges from a specific cultural perspective or location and constructs an implied response for its readers. The dramatic monologue also negates the presumption of a universal poetic “I” that speaks for all humanity since a specific individual speaks, and utterance readily becomes a site of investigation because its social context is legible to readers.20

To take one of the best-known examples, in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” an imperious duke with blood on his hands brazenly negotiates marriage terms for his next wife. His power and arrogance are clear, but whether he deliberately hints that he ordered the murder of his first wife, who was insuffi-
ciently impressed by his “nine-hundred-year-old name” (33), or inadvertently reveals his guilt is left for readers to resolve. If readers assume the former, they must also determine why he would implicate himself in murder. In thus calling attention to speech acts (the Duke even quotes himself in line 6), the monologue calls attention to, and questions, all monological, one-sided utterance. In Browning’s poem not only the socially inferior envoy is excluded from speech, but also the last duchess whose two-dimensional portrait is jealously controlled by the Duke (9–10), and the next duchess who is
intimately affected by but not a party to the negotiations governing her fate. The dramatic monologue thus acts not only to challenge the universality of Romantic lyric and subjectivity, but also to open poetic utterance to analysis of its power relations and consideration of those excluded from speech. Monologue is used to express the Duke’s sensibility but, as a form, also turns against itself.

Still, the role of print culture in poetry’s dialogism should not be underestimated. The mass medium of the periodical and newspaper effectively transformed even brief lyrics into approximations of dramatic monologues, since the lyric placed on its own page or huddled into a column jostled against fiction, gossip, political argument, travel writing, news, satires, science reports, art criticism, sociological analysis, musical entertainments, theatrical notices, or snippets of the latest “intelligence.” The lyric, no matter how complex or finely crafted, could in this context offer only a contingent rather than transcendent perspective, forced as it was to compete with other voices and views for authority.

One of Christina Rossetti’s best-known lyrics, “Up-hill,” can serve as a useful example:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
   Yes, to the very end.  
Will the day’s journey take the whole long day?  
   From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
   A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
   You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
   Those who have gone before.  
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
   They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
   Of labour you shall find the sum.  
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
   Yea, beds for all who come.

To eyes accustomed to free verse, the dominant mode of serious poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the regularity of Rossetti’s quatrains and abab rhyme scheme, as well as her occasional resort to archaisms like “morn” and “Yea,” may seem most striking. Readers familiar with William Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience will recognize one source of Rossetti’s reliance on simple diction and question and answer to
address the end of life’s journey, just as Blake’s “The Lamb” addresses its origins: “Little lamb, who made thee?” (1). The poem’s focus on religion and its restrained tone are also consistent with the decorous piety that Victorian readers expected from the “poetess” in an era when Bible reading and sermons were part of daily life.

In all these ways “Up-hill” seems highly traditional. But Rossetti’s lyric slips free from overdetermined patterns of form and meaning and repays close attention with successive surprises. The engraving Blake devised for “The Lamb” makes it clear that a little boy addresses a lamb in the song; Rossetti’s questioner and respondent are ungendered and untethered. The length of the journey and a night-time arrival establish the “I” as a pilgrim-through-life seeking answers about death, but who answers? The echo in “Up-hill” of Matthew 7:7 (“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you”) may suggest that Christ responds in Rossetti’s even-numbered lines. Yet this respondent claims the casual relation of mere “friend” to the poem’s questioner and proffers assurance only that the long, hard struggle of life culminates in a place to lie down and sleep. Indeed, the respondent pointedly refuses certain knowledge to the anxious question, “Shall I find comfort ..?”; “Of labour you shall find the sum” may imply that the speaker’s deeds of a lifetime will determine the conditions meted out in the afterlife, or the line may allude bleakly to Ecclesiastes, in which the implied answer to the question “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (1:3) is “nothing.”

The poem, like its elusive respondent, throws the basic question of who is speaking back upon its reader. The poet herself could be the respondent, acting as the proverbial reader’s “friend,” who here provides answers about death. If so, the “poetess” abandons feminine humility and takes on the mantle of the prophet – an assertive intervention in an age that still denied women public authority in the church. Or the respondent might be death itself, a possibility that displaces piety and religious assurance in favor of irony and alienation as the inquiring pilgrim confronts the supremely confident figure of death awaiting its inescapable harvest. In this interpretive scenario death’s successively stressed words of line 6, which mimetically retard the pace of “slow dark hours” and suggest the tolling of the death knell, might be read as taunting the questioner with death’s grim approach and the tedium of eternity. The undecided identity of the respondent shores up the mystery that surrounds life’s end no matter how the poem is read, but whether the mystery is sacred, terrifying, or bitterly ironic remains unclear.

Nor is the poem always rhythmically stable, though its rhymes are perfect and their scheme unvarying. The questioner consistently speaks in lines of five feet, predominantly in iambic pentameter; the respondent’s rhythms vary
unpredictably from the iambic trimeter that seems established in the first stanza. Line 6 has as many feet, while line 12, somewhat unnervingly, answers back in the same iambic pentameter used by the pilgrim to pose a question. Does the mirroring rhythm signify sympathetic harmony, empty echo, or parody? The respondent shrinks back to tetrameter in line 14 of the final stanza, then closes as in the beginning with a trimeter line, falsely seeming to assure the reader of stability where there is none.

Chiselled and chaste, the lyric “Up-hill” unleashes a surprising number of possible voices, tones, and perspectives. The lyric is structured as a dialogue to begin with, and the two speakers’ possible identities bring divergent frames of reference to bear upon the exchange. For the poem’s very first public readers, the lyric’s opening onto a range of voices and competing beliefs would have been reinforced by its initial appearance in the February, 1861 issue of Macmillan’s Magazine (see Figure 1).

Flanking articles on “Trade Societies and the Social Science Association” and “The Ghost He Didn’t See” summon the very challenges and fallibilities that make life’s journey an uphill battle indeed. “Trade Societies” closes by examining the rights of workers to organize based on the principle derived from political economy that “class-life is a battle”; “The Ghost He Didn’t See” concerns a soldier back from the Crimean War whose kin seek no general accounts of battle because the “electric telegraph and express trains” and “Own Correspondent” of The